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THE DECLINE OF THE  
SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN IDEAL:  
INDIAN SUMMER

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GEORGIA STATE COLLEGE • ATLANTA, GEORGIA



# THE DECLINE OF THE SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN IDEAL: INDIAN SUMMER

*Asa Timberlake in In This Our Life*

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## Preface

This paper is one half of a chapter from my doctoral dissertation which is titled *The Decline of the Southern Gentleman Ideal as Presented in Certain Recent Novels by Southern Authors*.

The foreword will enable the reader to discern the general idea and to fit Asa Timberlake into his proper place.

## FOREWORD

Without any fear of serious misstatement, one may assert that the passing of time has proved that to everything there is a season. Without any fear of misstatement at all, one may observe that the Southern Gentleman as a noble character in novels has had his period of flourishing, his season of comfort. He has been depicted from greatness to decadence, from idealization to degradation, from good to evil. In novels he was once a character who exemplified the American ideal in the chivalric tradition. Possessing every virtue, every grace, he was set forth as a man to admire and to emulate. One cannot read John Esten Cook and Thomas Nelson Page and their kind without noting their creation of the ideal man in the character of the Southern Gentleman. After the War both the Northern and the Southern reader found the ideal of the Southern Gentleman wholly admirable to so great an extent that Page and Cook and the others could not write often enough to satisfy their readers. Sir Walter Scott had come to America in his own texts, and also, in addition, one might say that he had come as Thomas Nelson Page: *Waverley* had become *Red Rock* in a nearer chronology and locale.


It has become trite to say, yet it is, nevertheless, true to say it: that chivalry had its last flourishing in the Old South. And just as Scott made the epitaph and elegy for the historic Age of Chivalry, so did Page make the epitaph and elegy for the historic Old South. In making it he wrote, necessarily, of the figure about whom the civilization centered: the Southern Gentleman. Later writers in America followed his pattern for a long time, and they still follow it, but with a difference, a deadly difference. Most of them now make the Southern Gentleman character a vicious, malevolent figure who only indulges himself in power. Or they make of him in decline a hypocrite or a weakling or a fool. At best they are likely to treat him with either condescension as a well meaning but unintelligent figure or with superciliousness as a parasite. They do not any longer take him and his mode of being seriously. There are, happily, a few writers who are more perceptive, however, in their dealing with him. These make an effort to present him in full, with a remembrance of the judgment of his time as well as the judgment of their time. Then, when these writers present him in decline, they show that he has a good ideal to follow which has somehow gone wrong.

William Faulkner is the best of these. He gives a Southern Gentleman for every period, from the ideal character of the Ante-Bellum time to the present time. In their order of chronology and of decline, Faulkner's Colonel Sartoris, General Compson, Old Bayard, Jason Compson, III, and Jason Lycurgus Compson, IV, provide an interesting continuity. These show the Southern Gentleman in each stage of his pattern. They represent his decline. Colonel Sartoris is a Southern Gentleman who follows a certain pattern of behavior and who holds to a certain group of ideals. The ideals are ennobling ones despite the fact that a man would not now approve each item involved. General Compson, Old Bayard, and Jason Compson, III, have the same ideals that Colonel Sartoris has, yet they fall further and further from being able to live by them. And Jason Lycurgus Compson, IV, is in the heritage of the Southern Gentleman but repudiates categorically the complete tradition.

Asa Timberlake in *In This Our Life* falls into the fourth degree of the decline of the Southern Gentleman. He represents the Gentleman in the period when he retained a knowledge of the old ideals and a desire to follow them but when he lacked a firm belief in them. This condition renders Asa admirable but ineffectual. He is in the position regarding all attributes of life that Marius the Epicurean is in about religion. Marius has lost his belief in the Pantheon of Rome and is unable to capture belief in the Nazarene. So has Asa lost his center of faith in the old ideals, and yet he is unable to take up the new. He wishes to see honor, integrity, and compassion and he sees only egotism, crassness, and the inclination to the main chance. The pattern of the decline of the Southern Gentleman is in five stages. The Zenith is at 1860 represented by Uncle George in Stark Young's *Heaven Trees*. The High Summer is during the War and Reconstruction represented by Hugh McGee and Malcolm Bedford in Stark Young's *So Red The Rose* and Colonel John Sartoris in William Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and *Sartoris*. The Yellowing may be said to be about the turn of the century and is shown in Colonel Rudolph Musgrave in James Branch Cabell's *The River In Grandfather's Neck*. Indian Summer falls during the first part of the present century and is cogently presented in the character of Asa Timberlake in Ellen Glasgow's *In This Our Life*. The final period at Nadir is depicted by Bogan Murdock in Robert Penn Warren's *At Heaven's Gate* and Jason Lycurgus Compson, IV, in William Faulkner's *The Sound And The Fury*.

Asa Timberlake, then, is in the pattern toward the end. He strikes the heart and the mind of the reader. The curt would give him short shrift as a weakling who does the world no good. The idealistic would merely say that he lacks absolute devotion to his ideals and fails. The compassionate would say that in this bad world he tries to keep the faith and tries to make the best he can of it.

There is no end to seeking and finding and no end to seeking and not finding.



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## THE DECLINE OF THE SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN IDEAL: INDIAN SUMMER

Asa Timberlake in *In This Our Life*

Throughout her novels in which, as she herself says, she gives a freely interpretive account of history and life in Virginia from the eighteen forties to the nineteen forties, Ellen Glasgow sets forth the pattern of the Southern Gentleman and his decline. She shows the decline from Major Lightfoot,<sup>1</sup> a fine old eighteenth-century English gentleman very like Sir Roger de Coverley, and Governor Ambler,<sup>2</sup> a gentler, more perceptive and finely drawn man, during the period of the War down to Judge Gamaliel Honeywell,<sup>3</sup> a romantic comedian in whose life, though quite correct, all the essence of living is absent, and Asa Timberlake, a gentle, meek man who knows in his heart that the good life had been constituted in the old virtues and in the old modes but who, too, cannot find the center of life that his forebears have known, during the ante-bellum period to 1939-1945. In the intermediary stages there are men like Jason Greylock, a talented, weak man who can bring only hurt to Dorinda, who loves him but who is of a lower state than he, and Bernard Battle, who is not worth Eugenia's family affection.

*In This Our Life* provides one with the poignant account of Asa Timberlake, a Southern Gentleman by heritage and by instinct, who has not well survived the whips of time. He knows the ideals of his heritage, and he experiences within himself glimmers of the greatness of his tradition, but he lacks a certain force which he needs in order to snare wealth and power in the new world of the twentieth century. It may be merely that he, as the best of later Compsons and Sartoris cannot reduce themselves, can simply not reduce himself to out-conniving the Snopeses. He can out-connive them if he wishes to, for he possesses greater intelligence, greater ability, greater character than they have. It is, however, the possession of these three, especially the last, coupled with the ideals of his inheritance which prevents his demeaning himself to follow modes of conduct which he cannot approve merely because he may profit by doing so. He thus is regarded by Lavinia, his wife, by Stanley, his daughter, by William Fitzroy, and even sometimes by Roy, his daughter, as a failure. Lavinia has retired for freedom into hypochondriac invalidism and has made Asa into the servitor of her sickroom. William Fitzroy has become enormously wealthy and has condescended to and patronized Asa for years. Stanley has become completely concerned only to snatch voraciously at every new and wild and destructive experience she can think of and has long regarded her father as only an occasional lackey when she is in trouble. Roy has known her own heart well and has learned that it is very like her father's and has felt a nearness to and love for him that none of the others has. And Asa, who knows them all better than they know themselves and himself not less, discovers regularly and sadly that he is able to help, in the more overt ways, only Lavinia and William and Stanley, not Roy. But he also is aware that there is a solace and comfort of the soul which he can offer Roy, and he knows that the others do not have any powers of feeling and perception that will allow them to comprehend the nobility of his and Roy's dependence on each other. And he further knows that finally he cannot offer anything even to Roy, for she is young and he is old, and she will go where he cannot go and do what he cannot do because they are, after all, different in age and in kind and even in quality.

Furthermore, as he says, when thinking of the many disappointments and frustrations Roy has had at the hands of Stanley and often knowing that Roy has just passed through some experience of violent and abandoned action, although he does not know what it has been, those who are young must experience life and must follow their internal compulsions. "Youth, he told himself, has no finality. In seeking and in finding there is not ever an end, nor is there an end in seeking and in not finding."<sup>4</sup> Now, Asa is thinking of Roy, but he realizes that this is true of himself also, for he, too, has sought and not found. Even the freedom that he could have had latterly with Kate Oliver after her husband's death he sees fading but not ever disappearing because he feels that he must not leave Lavinia even though they have long ceased to mean anything more than burdening habit to each other.

Stanley has sought desperately for what one supposes to be happiness, and it seems that her horrible happiness is in the destruction of the happiness and comfort of those about her. She discards her own fiancé for her sister's husband, and after Roy has divorced Peter so that Stanley may marry him, she leads him to suicide by demanding more money than he can give her and more emotional attention than he has to expend. Stanley then returns home and recaptures her former fiancé, whom Roy has grown to love and who has grown to love her. In a wild drive in the automobile that she has wheeled from Uncle William, she hits and kills a little white child and undertakes to blame the colored boy Parry

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Glasgow, *The Battle-Ground* (New York, 1902).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Glasgow, *The Romantic Comedians* (Garden City, New York, 1926).

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Glasgow, *In This Our Life* (New York, 1941), p. 467.

and would have succeeded in doing so but for Asa. It may be that she finds no more in her seeking than Asa has found, but she does great hurt to those who love her and to many others. It is Asa who behaves with human decency in opposing her. His reasons for doing so relate to the outworn ideal of *noblesse oblige*.

Lavinia has always thought of herself as a very great lady who has suffered the bitter fate of marrying a weak man who cannot provide properly for his wife and daughters. She has retreated into querulous hypochondria in which she has found a kind of immunity to the difficulties and labors of life, even though it does not provide the freedom she has sought. She has wanted social grace, social prestige, and social power, and she feels that Asa's lack of a great deal of money has prevented her having them. She does not understand that she could never have had the first and probably never the two others, no matter how much money Asa had had. Lavinia is not of the quality of Asa's mother, who has possessed all these, even finally in ill health and poverty. It is Asa who looks after Lavinia with endless patience and care, but who in a gentle, forbearing manner prevents her from mistreating Roy in her ardent favoring of Stanley, whom she wishes to become the most popular society matron in the city in compensation for her never having been.

William Fitzroy has become enormously wealthy as a result of his single-minded, shrewd pursuit of success, which means to him simply wealth, with the resultant ability to buy everything that a crass, unimaginative man wants. He has purchased social place, which his wife, Charlotte, does not especially care for, and purveys a lavish, un-Southern hospitality at his pretentious mansion pretentiously named Fitzroyal. He achieves Stanley's affection by giving her money, an automobile, and support against Asa. He represents the form of success which Asa finds repulsive. Yet, when for all his money William is at a loss in dealing with people and situations that he wants to deal with, Asa frequently helps him. And William is irritated that so unsuccessful a man as Asa is able to provide a presence and a manner which enable him to proceed well when William fails.

Asa Timberlake is both strong and weak, the weakness arising from the strength. The strength lies in his integrity and in his reverence for the old honorable ideal of magnanimity of heart. And, of course, inherent in this old ideal is that one does not govern the impulses of his heart efficiently nor hold his mind to shrewd patterns for profit. He rather follows his heart and does not ever allow his mental processes to become those concerned only for the main chance. In the world in which Asa finds himself, the frantic pursuit of the main chance is for most people the reason for being. Asa recognizes both the forces without himself and the forces within his nature that make him what he is and that cause him to behave as he does. Although he does not gain money and although his wife and his children are finally alien to him, his life is not a disaster because he retains character, integrity, conscience, and an ennobled mode of being. And one must remember that to retain character in Asa's time is itself heroic. It is for many the only victory, but it is the best, the supreme victory in a time when convenience has replaced faith, when desire for movement has replaced constancy to home, when humanitarianism has replaced love. Asa lives when faith and family have greatly deteriorated. Yet he retains and scrupulously follows the ideals of loyalty and beauty that his mother has imparted to him in the gentle precept and lovely example of her life and actions.

Asa cannot, for example, really approve leaving one's family, and he stays on for weary years and obeys the whims of the querulous Lavinia, whom it is impossible to please and who demands greater and ever greater servitude from anyone willing to grant any or from anyone who judges he owes her consideration. Finally, this is only Asa, who quite literally "for worse" has joined himself in matrimony with her. She does not possess character and is neither heroic nor tragic for all her real infirmities and slights, for she has never been of sufficient quality to be worthy of heroism or tragedy. But Asa has nursed her for years and will nurse her until he dies and will never leave her to marry Kate, even though Roy and Stanley do not need him and even though a paid servitor would serve Lavinia as well as he can serve her. He stays in order to fulfill what in the view of his mother's time is his duty: to be with his wife in sickness and in health and to serve his children in whatever way he can.

When Stanley steals Roy's husband and Roy gives him up, Asa understands why Roy must do as she does; yet he has always believed in the stability of families. The separation of husband and wife and the division of families has become very frequent in Asa's later years. But the happiness and the stability and the love that the separations and divisions are to bring do not seem to come. Remaining faithful to the ideal involved in the union of man and woman in marriage is a part of the character of Asa. On the last page one finds that the yearning is in Asa's heart to go to Kate, but he cannot do so, for there is also the obligation that an earlier impulse of the heart holds him to. The old-fashioned Southern Gentleman has always been bound to remember that he must not harm people who have any right to expect consideration of him. It does not matter that times and notions change nor that one may have bound himself foolishly. A man must keep his word and perform his duty at whatever the cost to him. He has his honor

to think of above all else. And Asa is always conscious of the demands of the kind of honor that has guided his own father and mother. Because of being unable to do those things which he must not do, he does not leave Lavinia. "Looking up at the closed sky, once again he had a vision of Kate and the harvested fields and the broad river. Still ahead, and within sight, but just out of reach, and always a little further away, fading, but not ever disappearing, was freedom."<sup>5</sup> Saving only the character to withstand the appealing temptation, nothing can hold a man to what he conceives to be his duty when what he desires most is easily accessible to him. Asa possesses the jewel of character in a time when it is largely an unesteemed quality.

That the members of a family owe each other the utmost consideration and love is yet a notion that Southerners give lip service to, but the strongly-knit unity of the family is coming to an end even in the South. The agencies of society now have usurped the rites of the family and have done so with the approval of and by the desire of the family itself. Children are given over as soon as possible to the nursery, to the kindergarten, to the common school, to the Boy Scouts, to a baseball team, to a social club, to anything available to take them away from home and to give them a "group interest" foreign to the native and best group interest of their family. And when the children become adults, they pursue golf or culture or organization and in turn rid themselves of the nuisance of dealing with their children as soon as they can. Asa Timberlake deplores this inclination to decentralize the family and remains to help Lavinia and Roy and Stanley to the limit of his abilities. When Peter is going to divorce Roy in order to marry Stanley, Asa is at hand to try to prevent the dissolution if he can and to do as much as possible to comfort all his family if he cannot.

Lavinia, in considering the strength of her daughters, observes that Roy is the one who has never needed protection but that Stanley is sufficiently violent and wild that she has always needed it even in her romances. Stanley is to marry Craig, but she is not entering into the marriage with any thought of obliging herself to Craig nor to any children she might bear. Lavinia tries ineffectually to advise her about what marriage and family involve and fails, largely one supposes, because she herself has never really understood, as her treatment of Asa indicates. When Lavinia tells Stanley to be sure that she is making the right marriage because the wrong one will ruin her whole life, Stanley replies merely, " 'It won't ruin my whole life. Marriage isn't one's whole life.' " <sup>6</sup> Well, marriage may not literally be one's whole life, but the Southern Gentleman has always considered it to be the basic part of a whole life. And it is not to be entered into lightly nor with the expectation of a quick ending of it if there are difficulties, nor without love. But to Stanley and the people of her generation, marriage has become a suit one may wear, and, as always, one may change his suit to fit the season. This outlook of marriage and family Asa can never really understand nor accept, for he has remained faithful to a nobler ideal.

The three divisions of *In This Our Life* with their headings clearly show forth Ellen Glasgow's notion of the great falling off in quality of the ideals people live by, especially of the ideal of the Southern Gentleman, from what has been to what is. From "Family Feeling" to "Years of Unreason" to "All Things New" is the progress of decline, and only Asa retains those admirable older qualities associated with the old Southern ideal of the force of the family relation. The progress is from faith, love, and honor to no faith, no love, no honor.

In the crisis when Stanley has jilted Craig and run off with Peter, Asa's feelings and yearnings are toward Roy. He fears that Roy will not be able to endure the loss of Peter and will do some terrible thing because of her living in a time of no faith. He realizes his condition, and in his mind there passes, "I may have lost my beliefs, but the empty forms of my beliefs are still holding me. And Roy would have nothing left, not even those vague impressions to live by."<sup>7</sup>

In his conversation with Roy in which she tells him that Stanley can have Peter, that nobody, not even Peter, is going to spoil her life, Asa observes, " 'The hardest thing for me to believe is that family feeling no longer means anything, for better or worse. It has done harm enough, I know, but at least it held things together when the world rocked. Anyway, the family as a unit now seems to be only another habit that has played out.' " <sup>8</sup> Herein Asa notes but the truth. He knows that the people of his time are faithful to their families only for better and that when worse comes they do not immediately consider how they may keep together for love's and for blood's sake, but, rather, they immediately consider how they may individually absolve themselves from helping. Roy observes that she is not obliged to love Stanley because she happens to be related to her. And possibly for this point of view, Roy has to travel in the land east of Eden. For it is strongly held in the Southern heritage that one must love and help his blood kin even to his own hurt and despite their shiftlessness and unworthiness. One sees clearly that with Asa the family fealty of the Timberlakes is coming to an end. They will no longer have any

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

person or place or ideal to bind them together. They will all follow their varied compulsions to trivial or ignoble ends.

The lovely and shining lady of Asa's life is his mother, not his wife nor his daughters nor Kate nor any young lady of his youth. He cannot think of womankind without thinking of the great lady who was his mother, for she has had about her beauty and charm and vibrance that remained with her even in ill health and in poverty. She is the enchanting lady of his heart. "No one, he told himself now, had ever come so near to him as his mother. Not Roy, not Kate, not anyone in the world. Never had he laughed with any other woman as he had laughed with her, pure laughter, without irony, without bitterness."<sup>9</sup> When his mother dies, he can only laugh silently within himself. From his earliest time, Asa remembers the loveliness of his mother as a young lady to her death as a sick, poor, old lady. She has been beautiful throughout her life. When Asa and Minerva talk of Stanley and Roy and when Minerva observes that "Roy favors your ma,"<sup>10</sup> Asa is overcome with tenderness at the recollection of his mother and knows, of course, that Roy is inevitably his favorite daughter because she reminds him of his mother. When Minerva further recalls that when Asa's mother was young and was dressed for a party she looked as if she were made of roses and smelled like a rose as well, Asa can hardly bear the memory. For he too remembers the lovely lady of his vision dressed in lace and satin bending over his bed to tell him goodnight as the last thing before he went to sleep. And the loveliness of her presence prefigured the angel of his dreams and the everlasting ideal of his heart.

Near the end of the book, Asa shows with heartbreaking poignancy the effect that the remembering of his mother has on him. Again it is in a conversation with Minerva that the power of the memory of his mother overwhelms him. He has come to find out if he can help Parry, Minerva's son, who Stanley says had been driving her car when the little white girl is run over and killed. He notices again the simple treasures in Minerva's tidy, scrubbed house. Among the humble, valueless items is an enlarged photograph of his mother in her wedding dress, holding the place of honor over the mantelpiece. Asa cannot rationalize the heightening of his heart, but his affection and respect for Minerva and Minerva's reverence for the memory of his mother move him beyond explanation. He knows that heart-warming affection and long remembering and all the other large emotions have gone out of fashion, and he wonders if he is only a damn fool and an old fogey.<sup>11</sup> But he knows in his thinking heart that he is right to remember that he owes Minerva and Abel affection and protection because their folks have always belonged together and that he owes Parry no less than the consideration and justice that the more fortunate always owe the less fortunate. But his debt to them is relative to their and his remembrance of his mother.

Then in addition to her loveliness, Asa remembers his mother's grace and courage in poverty and in illness and in age. With equanimity and vitality and dignity, she has faced taking in boarders and scrubbing the floors herself and cooking cheap food. She has borne sickness quietly and easily, without people's ever knowing what it costs her. She has endured poverty and suffered illness, all the while keeping her sense of humor and her lovely, even demeanor toward all the people and incidents that have passed before her life. There has been no long-suffering, self-righteousness about her, for she has been a true lady and has known what constitutes quality in being.

When a few of the family and friends are celebrating the approaching marriage of Stanley and Craig, they forgoth at Asa's house and talk stridently, laugh raucously, and drink as much whiskey as they can hold. And Asa, while he serves them, remembers that in his mother's time there had been the gracious and valued ceremony of a polite company who had understood good conversation and had been served nothing stronger than Madeira and thin biscuits.<sup>12</sup> The recollection of his mother in the crises of his life illustrates the lady of his delight as Melanie Hamilton illustrates the lady of Ashley Wilkes's delight and strangely, finally the lady of Rhett Butler's delight.<sup>13</sup> The reason, of course, is that upon close association one may understand the quality of a very great lady. Minerva, too, understands the quality that has been a part of Asa's mother, and, although Asa and his mother have served boarders, Minerva makes the old distinction and objects to Asa's carrying in the food to Stanley's company "You ain't goin' to carry in that waiter, Mr. Asa. I reckon your ma would have a fit if she could see you toting a waiter."<sup>14</sup> Now this may, indeed, seem incongruous; it, nevertheless, constitutes both Minerva's and Asa's recognition of a tradition in which the quality of a lady means a great deal. They have, with all its faults, a sense of grace and of beauty and of proportion which they associate with Asa's mother. And Asa wonders if the grace of his mother and her time have not flown away in the worship of acceleration in place of beauty.

In his religious manifestations, the Southern Gentleman of the olden day perfectly clearly has stood in awe of God and has made his proper obeisance to God, and he has shown that he feels the

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York, 1936).

<sup>14</sup> Glasgow, *In This Our Life*, pp. 64-65.

power and majesty of God. Because he owes it, he gives his allegiance to God. There is nothing pussy-footing or mealy-mouthed about his belief in God. But as the old pattern has declined, the Southern Gentleman has become merely a church member duly counted up in the statistics promulgated by the church. He is a member of a church because it is expected of him or because it serves his business well. He has really ceased to believe in God and has become a hypocrite like Bogan Murdock or at best a humanitarian, not a child of God. And Asa Timberlake is in the pattern of this decline. He wishes to retain the old Christian faith in fact but seems unable to do so. Like Marius the Epicurean, he has lost the old faith and cannot attach himself to a new one. A stability in Minerva that Asa has lost is the stability of faith. Minerva says to Jacob as he drives her home, "I'm certainly glad I've got my religion, Brother Jacob. I wouldn't take a mint of money for my religion." <sup>15</sup>

For Asa there is no longer any firm conviction in religion. He retains an ennobling moral view, but he has lost clear religious faith. Unlike Minerva and Abel, he has not known the Lord all his life even though he remembers Him from the time of his youth. During his conversation with Stanley's nurse after Peter has shot himself, the nurse tells Asa, "My father used to say that when the world got rid of hell, it would regret it only once, and that would be always." And Asa replies, "I wonder. Wouldn't a belief in humanity serve the same purpose." <sup>16</sup> The answer is No. The fear of the Lord is assuredly the beginning of Christian understanding. For, although God will reward, He will also surely punish. And Asa thus loses faith in God, and yet he cannot put his faith in man even though he tries the course of substituting humanitarianism for religion. He, however, realizes his plight and regrets it. He knows that rather than have no faith at all it is better to watch Proteus rising from the sea and hear the call that Triton makes.

When Roy condemns the ideas of duty and personal responsibility as old-fogey, fantastic notions, Asa tries to tell her that he has been brought up to consider these two and some others as more important than happiness. Roy cannot follow him; she states that the miserable-sinner feeling that the people of her father's generation have had has been put over on them by religion. She is ironic, for she believes that in holding to the ideals of duty and personal responsibility they have always given up things that they want and have always held onto things they should give up. In answering her, Asa is uncertain. "But I was never bent on religion. All I felt was that I ought to do the best I could to keep things on the decent side. If you ask me why—well, honestly, I don't know . . ." <sup>17</sup> Truly Asa doesn't know, and in his not knowing lies his loss of religion which makes him weaker than he might have been. With the loss of a devotion to religion goes a loss of or diffusion of a vital force, for one of the very few vital impulses in life is the religious impulse. And the traditional Southern Gentleman has found his comfort in the faith of Christianity, whereas the latter-day Southern Gentleman finds inadequate comfort in the good works of Christianity.

In talking of hard times, Asa observes that they—his people—have faced worse times. "The difference is that in worse times, we had something to stand on and to hold by. Even in Reconstruction and afterwards, we still believed in ourselves." <sup>18</sup> And Charlotte recalls that her mother has been kept alive by hating the Yankees and has finally only the single affirmation of hatred for the Yankees to keep her alive. Asa thinks that it has not been hatred but moral indignation that Southerners in the Reconstruction period have felt. They have been indignant at the Yankees for treading them down and for the black practices of the capretbag military occupation and government. They have had convictions and a sense of human dignity, and they have maintained them.

Asa knows that he has a sense of perspective and a sense of beauty, and he further knows that they are largely the result of the past in his family and of his knowledge of and his feeling for it. He is grieved to hear Craig dismiss the effect of the past in the glib statement that what is wrong with Asa and his generation is that they depend on the past, that they imagine that history proves something. But Asa notes that for all that Craig is eager after only new things and ideas, he cannot maintain a conviction and cannot feel deeply. Craig is bright and attractive and really unprincipled. Like most of the others of the new time, he finds the pragmatism of today unsuited to the conditions of tomorrow. He will never hold a steady conviction, nor build a beautiful house. He, like the others of his period, thinks of himself as a transient through life who ought to take no deeply felt thought of anybody else. He is amiable enough and appears possibly to mean well. He and his kind are just not involved in mankind; they are involved in themselves.

The religious impulse has somehow gone wrong in Asa Timberlake, and, therefore, he is not able to keep the old faith even though he follows the moral code of the old faith. But one may follow all the Commandments except the first one and be without faith. Asa Timberlake has obeyed for a life time

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.



"Thou Shalt Not" and "Thou Shalt" unto the last jot and the last tittle of their meaning, but he does not have his mother's belief in God.

Having fallen far from seigniory, Asa does not have a retinue of servants. He can afford them no more than he can afford all the things which Lavinia is disappointed at not having. Yet Virgie and Parry and sometimes Abel, and even faithful Minerva, who has worked for his mother and whose folks have belonged to his folks before the War, do serve in Asa's household. Asa knows his obligation to all the colored people who serve his family, and he shows his tenderness and love for Minerva and her family because they are his friends as well as his servants. He is faithful to the trust that the master must look after the servant, an ancient ideal and one that is especially ingrained in the Southern Gentleman. When Minerva recalls Asa's mother, it is with an apparent love that causes Asa's eyes to fill and his heart to strain, for he knows that Minerva is remembering a great lady. He respects and loves Minerva. Asa thinks of Minerva as a very remarkable woman.<sup>19</sup> And Minerva knows that Asa is one of an older time, even as she is, and loves him as if he were one of her own and depends on him when she and hers are in trouble because she and he were of a time and condition which understood itself and because in that time their families relied on each other. In thinking of Asa while she and Abel and Parry are in their own humble house, she states herself simply, "I certainly do set a heap of store by Mr. Asa."<sup>20</sup> There can be no greater statement of love and respect from Minerva than to be "set a heap of store by." During the time of any difficulty for her family, Minerva knows that Asa will do whatever he can to help and will never do less than see that justice is done.

Minerva herself observes the change in the relation of the white race and the colored race, and she disapproves. She muses that one is what the Lord Almighty makes him and that he ought to recognize that he is different from others both individually and racially. She muses how she was raised along with her white folks and how her Mammy would have whaled the life out of her had she referred to her own folks as "Niggers" and how her Mammy would have been right to do so.<sup>21</sup> Parry's set toward the new ways disturbs her, for she cannot understand why Parry wants to know so much from books although she is proud that he is regarded as bright and promising and that he wants to go to Harvard College. She does not want to send him to school when he is a child, but Asa learns of Parry's inclinations and sees to it that he goes to school. And it is Asa's interest that leads Craig to plan to send Parry to college. Both Asa and Minerva like best the older modes of association between white people and colored people, yet they unite to help Parry in the new fashion with the result that Parry has a certain condescension toward Minerva and resentment toward Asa. They are no longer thoroughly comfortable in their associations.

As well as Asa loves Minerva, he occasionally feels removed from her as he has never felt removed from Aunt Matoaca, Minerva's mother and thus Parry's grandmother, who has been a slave and who much later has nursed Asa's mother through her last years. Asa has been completely at ease with Aunt Matoaca who has been herself at ease with white folks and colored folks. But every now and then he is not perfectly at ease with Minerva. And he simply does not know how to talk with Parry. Asa has respect and affection for Minerva even though she has never inspired him with the complete respect and love that he has given Aunt Matoaca who has known her white folks by heart. With Parry he feels formal and removed. Asa's feelings toward the three are reflected in their feelings toward him, and yet all love together. "It wasn't, Asa assured himself, that he distrusted the more educated Negroes: it was simply that he could not understand them as he had understood, through tradition, the older Negroes of servitude."<sup>22</sup>

When Minerva is at Asa's house, she and Asa talk easily of their early life, of Asa's mother, of Minerva's family, and of Asa's family; and Asa is comfortable with Minerva and she with him. But when he is with Minerva at her little house, he finds little to say except what relates to his specific mission in coming. Yet he trusts Minerva more than he would trust William or Lavinia or Stanley, who are his own kin. Minerva is in the old sense one of his folks, too, and she is one who has ultimate integrity, and Asa knows it. He has an inexplicable affinity for her.

Having to talk to Parry is difficult for Asa because he finds himself all but unable to do so even though he likes and respects Parry for himself and for being Minerva's son. And Parry, who likes and respects him, nevertheless is slightly sullen in his demeanor toward Asa even though he wants to talk to him, but he does not know what to talk about. Asa, feeling that the onus of conversation with Parry lies on him, tries to introduce items that Parry wants to talk about. But it is a strain, and the conversations are short-lived. The usual subject of the conversations is how Parry is getting along in his studies and what his ambitions are. At one point Parry tells Asa that he is studying law at night and that he would give "most" anything to get away to the North and that only his folks tie him at home. Asa, all the while

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 319-320.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

wondering what he can do about it, promises to help Parry, and that is all they know to say to each other. As they part Asa muses, "There wasn't anything to say, and had there been anything to say, he couldn't have said it. The twilight thickened between them, and he felt it was a dark thickness of race, that impenetrable obscurity, which was welling up among the intricate ties of human relationship. And through this thickness, which appeared alien and hostile, the boy's eyes, blind with seeking, stared back at him from a face that seemed to be without edges and without structure. All he really knew of Parry was a neat blue suit of clothes . . . But beyond these external details, which were the only obvious facts, he felt the thick silence, not of mystery, but of a vast emptiness."<sup>23</sup>

That vast emptiness indicates that neither Asa nor Parry can really feel any intrinsic affinity. Parry is basically sullen, and Asa is following what has become to him a hollow pattern of doing what he can to look after the colored folks who he feels have a right to expect it from him. There is a compulsion of principle, but there is no compulsion of human feeling.

At the time of great test, Asa follows the old principle of his youth, that one must look after those who are committed to him even at great cost to himself. When Stanley runs over and kills the little white girl and she lies so that Parry is to be blamed, Asa insists that Parry's side be considered. Stanley lyingly states that Parry has taken the car that Uncle William has given her to the garage when it is she who has been driving it and has hit the mother and child and killed the child. The police arrest Parry and jail him over his and Minerva's protests. In the arrest they show no kindness nor consideration nor even fairness. There is no human dignity in the process. They take Parry upon one-sided, unfair evidence and upon Stanley's word assume that he is guilty. Now, Stanley's word is no good whatsoever. Nothing she says may be relied upon, for she has no conception of honesty. She, as the others of her generation, has no principles of behavior and no allegiances except to herself. Her pragmatism is the prevailing pragmatism that allows one to reason that whatever is profitable for himself is right and truth. Asa has principles of behavior and allegiances to ideals, and, although he has lost the feeling of assurance that his principles and ideals constitute everlasting truth, he, nevertheless, does not accept a pragmatism that allows him to see Parry punished for an accident that his daughter is guilty of. This requires strength, and Asa possesses that strength which enables him to keep to his principles of looking after the welfare of those in his keeping even when sharp and heartbreaking decisions have to be made. When Asa realizes that it is Stanley, not Parry, who has killed the child, he knows that he will have to oppose Stanley and Lavinia and William and all the others in seeing that Parry is not blamed. He knows that they will think that he does not love his daughter, but he knows that they have long ago lost the strength to maintain an ideal. And he loves Stanley as much as they do and is even led to wonder if a principle as well as an appetite may betray one. He knows, of course, in the old time that could not have been thought of, and he holds to the old view that there is a distinction between right and wrong and that he has had from his youth the proper principles whereby one may make the distinction. He must, naturally, help Parry and oppose his family even if Stanley is arrested.

As soon as Asa learns that Parry has been arrested, Asa goes to comfort Minerva and Abel only to learn that Stanley is lying and that Parry had not left home all evening. Parry is in jail and has said nothing when the police have arrested him. Minerva has told the police that Parry has been at home listening to the radio most of the time, but they have paid her no attention since it is the word of a colored woman against that of a white woman. But Asa knows Minerva is telling the truth and that Stanley is lying. He promises Minerva and Abel that he will see Parry and will see that Parry is released. Minerva is unable to sleep after Parry is taken to jail and is in the kitchen ironing at eleven-thirty at night, long after her usual bedtime. She greets Asa, "The Lord knows I'm glad to see you, Mr. Asa! I was just telling Abel I knew we could count on you."<sup>24</sup> These two, Asa and Minerva, are people of quality, and they are friends. Each knows the absolute integrity of the other. Minerva knows that Stanley has lied, and Asa knows that Minerva knows it. But they do not mention it to each other. Asa realizes that Stanley's kind can never be worthy of a charge of trust over any things or any people.

On his visit to jail to see Parry, Asa observes that Parry is not really of strong character. Even though he is more nearly honest than she, Parry is no more capable of large emotions than is Stanley. But he talks with Parry and promises him help which he gives immediately so that Parry is released. His support of Parry, however, costs him the loss of the last modicum of affection that Stanley has for him, and in a violent scene she says that she does not trust him anymore. However, the loss of Stanley's affection is not a great loss, for she cannot give any great affection to anyone.

In jail, Asa sees that Parry cannot understand where quality lies, for Parry does not want to talk to him, and his not wanting to talk indicates to Asa that Parry has lost confidence in Asa and in Asa's good will. When Parry finally tells his side of the affair, he does so with no indication that he thinks that he will

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

be either believed or helped. He, therefore, unlike his mother, does not recognize that in his behavior toward colored people Asa has always been guided by the modes of his youth which have been the modes of the Southern Gentleman. Upon observing that Parry has lost confidence in his good will, Asa is sad, for he knows that the newer customs bear ever less and less relation to the ideal of *noblesse oblige*. Every man, he observes, grows more to profess belief that everybody is equal and, therefore, to consider nobody but himself and his own welfare. The result, Asa concludes, is that getting what one wants or thinks he wants motivates everyone and that a consideration of one's obligations is dismissed if it seems that they involve more than contribution to the Community Chest. Or if one is inclined to feel large obligations, Asa perceives that he is inclined to remark upon the pity of things and divert his thoughts. Without overmuch consideration of anybody else, one strives to gain those things which will make him happy, and, having got them, he finds that he has gained everything except happiness. One, Asa observes, does as Stanley does: he gets everything to make him happy except happiness. How unlike the people of his youth! But Asa cannot escape the feeling that the ideal of his youth, the ideal of being responsible, personally responsible, for his colored folks is a noble ideal and that he is bound by it to help Parry beyond merely wishing him well. He is obligated to help Parry to the limit of his ability, and he does so when he could, with no trouble except to his conscience, have agreed to let Parry take the blame, be imprisoned for a few years, and then be paid by William Fitzroy. William thinks it all right for a colored boy to be imprisoned whether he is guilty or not, as it probably does not harm the boy. Asa knows how wrong William is and can understand why colored people grow less strong in their trust of white people. Neither course can prosper the ideals that Asa follows. The result is that Asa clears Parry because he must, but he cannot *save* Parry because Parry, like Stanley, does not have within himself the quality of being saved.

Asa Timberlake is in the pattern of the Southern Gentleman, and he represents him in the breaking-up time just before he has lost all the goodness of those emanations of a noble mode which he can try to act by. Even though this is true, Asa does not command the conviction that his mother has had, and although he keeps the faith, much of its inmost cogency has departed. Asa, therefore, as a man of the older ideal and as a man of good will, is not greatly forceful in molding the world in which he finds himself, but he possesses character and maintains it, and that is in itself a triumph even though he represents ideals that no longer prevail.



## Biographical Sketch

Kenneth England was born and reared in Georgia. He has degrees from Georgia Southern College, The University of Georgia, and Vanderbilt University. He is presently Dean of Student Affairs and Professor of English at Georgia State College. He has taught in the public schools of Georgia and at North Georgia College, North Carolina State College, and the Georgia Institute of Technology. He has published articles, poems, stories, and reviews in *College English*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Mississippi Quarterly*, *The Georgia Magazine*, *Phoenix*, *Reality and Myth*, *Atlanta Poetry Gallery*, and in various newspapers.



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